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Hong Kong's Post-1997 Transformation in Perspective

Review Article*

There are three broad perspectives on Hong Kong's history or current development. The first is Sinocentric, which emphasizes the Opium Wars, the national humiliations and losses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the glorious resumption of sovereignty over the territory in 1997; good examples are the PRC state-sponsored histories *Nineteenth-Century Hong Kong* and *Twentieth-Century Hong Kong* (both in Chinese), commissioned and published in the run-up to 1997. The second is Eurocentric, privileging the economic, political and cultural interests of the British and other Westerners in the erstwhile British colony, and the legacy which they are said to have left behind. The works of historian George Endacott, journalist Richard Hughes and writers Jan Morris and Jonathan Dimbleby belong to this category. One or both of these perspectives have been predominant in the literature on Hong Kong. Less frequently encountered are books that assume the concerns and aspirations of the

* HONG KONG'S JOURNEY TO REUNIFICATION: Memoirs of Sze-yuen Chung. By Sze-yuen Chung. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press (distributed in North America by the University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor). 2001. xxii, 366 pp. (Coloured photos, maps.) HK\$120.00, paper. ISBN 962-996-020-6.

OUT OF THE SHADOW OF 1997: The 2000 Legislative Council Election in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Edited by Kuan Hsin-chi, Lau Siu-kai and Timothy Ka-ying Wong. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002. xvii, 364 pp. (Tables.) US\$26.00, paper. ISBN 962-996-030-3.

THE FIRST TUNG CHEE-HWA ADMINISTRATION: The First Five Years of the Hong Kong Administrative Region. Edited by Lau Siu-kai. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002. xxxiv, 430 pp. (Tables, graphs.) US\$26.00, paper. ISBN 962-996-015-X.

CRISIS AND TRANSFORMATION IN CHINA'S HONG KONG. Edited by Ming K. Chan and Alvin Y. So. Armonk (NY), London: M.E. Sharpe and Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2002. xv, 399 pp. (Tables, figures.) US\$74.95, cloth, ISBN 0-7656-1000-0; US\$29.95, paper, ISBN 0-7656-1001-9.

DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS ON HONG KONG 1900-1997: An Annotated Bibliography with an Appendix of Dissertations Completed in 1998 and 1999. Compiled and edited by Frank Joseph Schulman and Anna Leon Schulman. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001. xxxv, 823 pp. (Maps, graphs, charts, tables.) US\$59.90, cloth. ISBN 962-209-397-3.

HONG KONG: A Reader in Social History. Edited by David Faure. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2003. xxx, 678 pp. (Maps, tables, photos.) HK\$128.00, paper. ISBN 0-19-592973-X.

HONG KONG REINTEGRATING WITH CHINA: Political, Cultural and Social Dimensions. Edited by Lee Pui-tak. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001. xv, 268 pp. HK\$185.00/US\$27.95, paper. ISBN 962-209-511-9.

inhabitants of the territory itself, and which examine Hong Kong in its own terms. The seven books reviewed here redress that imbalance to a certain extent.

Five of the seven books are collections of essays written and edited by inhabitants of the territory. The Lau and Chan & So volumes both cover political and other changes in Hong Kong in the first five years since 1997. The volume edited by Kuan et al. is focused more narrowly on the Legislative Council election of 2000. The Lee volume is the first installment of selected papers from a major conference co-sponsored by Hong Kong University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, held in December 1997. The volume edited by Faure, as its title implies, is a compilation of previously published historical essays, brought together as part of a monumental series of Hong Kong Readers (of which ten have appeared). Together, these five volumes contain 76 articles, written by 64 different authors. It is clearly impossible to adequately cover so many articles within one brief overview.

This review will begin with the three books on Hong Kong since 1997 (Lau, Chan & So, Kuan et al.), and will bring in, for an added perspective, materials from the other two collections, as well as from the memoirs of Chung Sze-yuen, a prominent politician whose career straddled the Handover. Finally, the Shulmans' *Doctoral Dissertations* will round out the discussion with a quick survey of the rise of Hong Kong Studies in recent decades.

It is the consensus of the authors of the essays in the Lau and Chan & So volumes that things have not been going well in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), almost from the moment it was brought into existence on Handover Night. While the worst fears expressed in some quarters did not materialize—there was no crackdown on pro-democracy advocates or organizations—unforeseen difficulties have since arisen on the horizon and have continued to plague post-1997 Hong Kong. The most obvious problems are mainly economic in origin, beginning with the Asian financial turmoil in the autumn of 1997, which burst the twin bubbles of the stock and realty markets and ended the boom of the 1990s (Sung, Jao and Ho in Lau, ed.; Lui in Chan & So, eds.). The economic crisis, along with such problems as the avian flu (1997/98), the chaotic opening of Chek Lap Kok Airport (1998), the right of abode dispute (1999), public housing scandals and other issues have tested the political and administrative capacity of the HKSAR government to manage an increasingly difficult situation (Lau, Cheung and Burns in Lau, ed.; Chan and So & Chan in Chan & So, eds.). Meanwhile, the government has rolled back democratic advances and civil rights (e.g., Cheung and Ma in Lau, ed.; Chan, Pepper and Lo in Chan & So, eds.), set limits on judicial authority and the rule of law (e.g., Chen and J. Chan in Lau, ed.; Tai in Chan & So, eds.) and attempted to constrain the freedom of the mass media and academia (T. Wong in Lau, ed.; Postiglione, Lau & To, and Ku in Chan & So, eds.). The pro-democracy camp has been

disadvantaged by restrictions built into the Basic Law and the electoral system, and strained by its own internal cleavages (Cheung in Lau, ed.; Chan, Ma and Lo & al. in Chan & So, eds.); however, it has still been able to exert a certain amount of legislative influence within the executive-dominant system (Ma in Lau, ed.).

The unsatisfactory performance of the HKSAR government is attributed by most of the authors to the weak leadership of Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, among other factors. Lau characterizes Tung's governing strategy as a "shortfall in politics," an initial de-politicization project that unraveled before the end of his first term (Lau, ed., chapter 1). Chan & So sum up the crises into five categories: the democracy crisis, the constitutional crisis, the legitimacy crisis, the governability crisis and the developmental crisis. They conclude that the Tung administration was attempting to transform Hong Kong into a "developmental state under soft authoritarianism" (Chan & So, eds., chapter 15).

The 31 articles in the two volumes cover a broad range of topics: political, legal, economic and concerning civil rights, using many different approaches and diverse voices. However, there does not seem to be any inherent reason why certain topics are treated in one volume but not in the other, or why certain themes are left out altogether.

While the quality of the essays is uneven (and some of them need serious copy editing), both books are informative and enjoyable to read.

The essays in the Kuan et al. volume focus on a number of political issues related to the 2000 Legislative Council (Legco) election. Many of the authors also contributed to the Lau and/or the Chan & So collections; there is some overlap of contents. Particularly noteworthy in this volume, however, is Timothy's Wong's long-term tracking of identity: many more people in Hong Kong identify themselves as Hongkongese than as Chinese, especially among the younger and better educated citizens; they are also more likely to vote for the pro-democracy parties than those who identify themselves as Chinese.

While much rich fare has been packed into the 300-400 pages of each, there are important dimensions of Hong Kong society that underpin the politics and the ongoing struggle for human rights discussed in these volumes, without which the politics and struggle could not be fully appreciated. Two of these dimensions are the social impact of de-industrialization, and the vibrancy of social movements.

It is well known that Hong Kong began to experience de-industrialization in the 1980s with the Open Door Policy of the PRC. The macroeconomic implications have been highlighted in several essays (e.g., Lui in Chan & So, eds.; Sung in Lau, ed.). What has not been examined, however, are the effects that the loss of their factory jobs had on more than half a million workers—many of them middle-aged women who were highly skilled on the sewing machine. While most laid-off workers were able to find alternative work in service industries during the 1990s, the service work was less well paid and

not as secure as their previous jobs. One of the articles in the Lee volume, by Lang, Chiu & Pang, titled “Impact of plant relocation to China on manufacturing workers in Hong Kong” (Lee, ed., chapter 4), is based on some 1500 telephone interviews, and provides vivid evidence of the livelihood issues which have serious implications for social and political stability, especially with the economic downturn since 1997. The article by Ng Sek-hong, “Hong Kong labour law in perspective” (Lee, ed., chapter 7), discusses how in the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, labour law developed, stalled and then became politicized, again with clear implications for government and politics in the HKSAR.

The 1970s saw a wave of social movements which cumulatively changed the relationship between government and people in Hong Kong. The Chinese language movement, the anti-corruption movement, the primary school teachers’ strike, the nurses’ strike, the Precious Blood Gold Jubilee School affair and other collective expressions of popular protests and aspirations challenged the Draconian laws which restricted the rights of assembly and association, and, by the end of that decade, led to important informal and formal improvements in the way the British colony was governed. These movements provided the domestic backdrop for political development since the early 1980s. At the same time, civil society activism has continued to deepen and to proliferate (e.g., So in Lau, ed., chapter 16). Choi Po-king’s “The women’s movement and local identity in Hong Kong” (Lee, ed., chapter 11), is an astute analysis of feminism, one of the most important manifestations of the deepening and broadening popular demand for social change that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. The issue of feminism was shunned by the ruling elites and untapped by the political parties, and has been generally overlooked in these otherwise informative volumes on post-1997 Hong Kong.

Certain other important themes in Hong Kong’s transformation have also been neglected in these collections. For example, the government has incorporated the ideology and practices of managerialism into many dimensions of social and institutional life, but this is discussed in only a few of the essays (such as Chau & Wong, and Burns in Lau, ed.).

Another issue common to the three volumes is the frequent and unexamined use of the term “colonial,” which not only stands for a period in time, but also carries simplistic and anachronistic connotations. *Hong Kong: A Reader in Social History*, compiled by David Faure, pre-eminent Hong Kong historian, is a reminder of the need for vigilance when it comes to the abuse of such overarching terms. Faure cites the example of the rise of public housing in Hong Kong in 1954, which the government and scholars alike have deemed an emergency measure following the Great Fire of Shek Kip Mei. In fact, he points out, the Hong Kong government had been under pressure from the British government for many years to develop housing for the poor. However, Chinese members of Legco—all wealthy merchants

and property owners—vehemently objected and stalled the government proposals, until the Great Fire gave the governor an unchallengeable reason to override the objections. This was, of course, neither the first nor the last show of class interest in Legco politics, as all these books attest. Such cases point to the complex issues of clan, class and race, of urban elites and the common people, and of colonialism and the Chinese nation, all themes used by Faure to organize the 22 judiciously chosen essays which make up this volume. Although the book's coverage stops long before the Handover, it nevertheless provides a necessary background for an accurate and in-depth appraisal of more recent developments.

Read against the analytical essays in these five volumes, Chung Sze-yuen's memoirs have to be considered rather disappointing. Chung was born into a merchant's family in pre-war Hong Kong, and graduated in engineering from Hong Kong University (HKU) on the eve of the Japanese invasion. He left occupied Hong Kong to contribute his engineering skills to the Chinese resistance, and returned to work in his native city after the war. Subsequently he went to Britain for advanced studies, and became one of the first Hong Kong Chinese engineers to earn a Ph.D. During the 1950s to 1970s, he made important contributions to Hong Kong's industrial development, both professionally and as a prominent leader in the newly established Federation of Hong Kong Industries, the Trade Development Council and other advisory bodies. He was first named to Legco in the late 1960s, and began a political career which culminated in his appointment as Senior Member of Exco in 1980, and later as the first person to hold the position of Convenor of the post-Handover Exco of the HKSAR. In these capacities, he played major roles in Hong Kong's development for over half a century. A reader can rightly expect his memoirs to provide much enlightenment. However, the book disappoints as a source of information. On his early career in industrial development, Chung says very little. He devotes more than 90 percent of the book to the Sino-British negotiations over Hong Kong, yet regarding the long transition in the 1980s and 1990s, and the first few years of the HKSAR government, he reveals little that has not been previously published. His analyses of constitutional and political issues are generally superficial and often marred by misinformation about other political systems that he cites in comparison. Perhaps the most interesting revelation is the watershed in Chung's politics that the reader could perceive *circa* 1986: before that date, his main fears were about communism, but thereafter they were about democracy. This reorientation is never stated explicitly in the memoirs; but it must have had to do with his changing perceptions of threat. One need not doubt his reiterated avowals of loyalty to his native city; but at the same time, the reader cannot fail to notice that for Chung and for the segment of society he represents, what is good for business stands for what is good for Hong Kong.

Last and certainly not least of the books to be reviewed is the massive reference work on 2395 doctoral dissertations on Hong Kong written in universities around the world during the twentieth century. This collection is a monument to the indefatigable research of the compilers Frank Shulman and Anna Leon Shulman. It is a very handy tool, with a full bibliographic citation and abstract for each item, in both the original language and English. There are also author, institutional and subject indices, statistical tables and guides on how to locate the dissertations in each country.

Of these dissertations, 906 were submitted to American universities and the rest to universities in 28 other countries: 416 in Hong Kong, 341 in Britain, 94 in Canada, 67 in Australia, 140 in other European countries and 20 in the rest of Asia. It is noteworthy that most of the dissertations were written in anglophone countries, and that Hong Kong has not featured as a frequent subject of study by graduate students even in Mainland China or Taiwan. One could think of many reasons for this phenomenon, and without a detailed study beyond the scope of this review, it would be difficult to determine their relative importance.

One of the more important considerations for doctoral researchers is the availability of books. The establishment of Hong Kong documentary archives at Oxford and Stanford Universities, and of the Canada-Hong Kong Resource Centre (set up in 1994 by the joint efforts of York University and the University of Toronto, and now home to a collection of 50,000 volumes) has enabled even more students in North America and Europe to conduct research on Hong Kong.

As it is, the recent rise of Hong Kong Studies as a local as well as international subject has been phenomenal. Professor Wang Gungwu, former vice-chancellor of Hong Kong University, stressed in his foreword to this compendium that there was very little academic research done on Hong Kong before the 1970s, but that the volume of research has grown enormously since then. The statistical tables in this volume show that: during 1900-1966, there were only a few dissertations on Hong Kong from around the world every year; in the 1970s, the annual production was between 20 and 40; in the 1980s, between 40 and 90; and in the 1990s, more than 100. This exponential growth may be attributed to the increasing importance of Hong Kong itself, to the expansion of doctoral studies both in Hong Kong and around the world, and undoubtedly also to the emerging awareness by many scholars that Hong Kong represents a variant type of Chinese society and civilization, with inherent interest as well as broader implications. For all students interested in Hong Kong, the Shulmans deserve much praise and gratitude for their signal service.

To conclude, one should draw attention to Article 23 of the Basic Law. This article in the Beijing-promulgated constitution requires the HKSAR government to legislate on “national security.” Several of the authors whose essays are reviewed here were encouraged by the fact that the HKSAR

government had not acted on this issue during the first five years of its rule—they regard this as a litmus test for Hong Kong's civil rights, rule of law and internal autonomy under the “one country, two systems” formula. However, the government has since gazetted the bill giving effect to Article 23, over strong protests from Hong Kong's civil society, as well as expressions of concern from the international community.

On 1 July 2003, the sixth anniversary of the Handover, more than half a million people marched on the streets to protest against the planned passage of the draft bill on July 9, forcing Tung's government to make some reluctant concessions—first to compromise on its contents, then to postpone its second and third readings. Subsequent mass rallies have demanded the fulfillment of the half-promises in the Basic Law that provide for possible

direct elections of both the chief executive and the whole Legco after 2007. Hong Kong's civil society remains strong and unbowed.

York University, Toronto, Canada, July 2003

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